

Hutton Inquiry: A black day for democracy in Britain

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
3 February 2004

Lord Hutton's inquiry into the death of whistleblower Dr. David Kelly has revealed the advanced stage of decay of British democracy. It is a watershed in the attack on democratic rights that has been waged for more than two decades by successive governments and which has dramatically accelerated under the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The fundamental question underlying the inquiry was: Do the British people have the right to hold their government accountable on matters pertaining to life and death?

Hutton's verdict was a resounding "No." He has come down squarely in favour of a quasi-dictatorial form of government, in which those who hold power are not answerable for their actions to the people. He has, moreover, set in motion a witch-hunt against any section of the media that maintains the slightest independence from the government and subjects its claims to critical review. His findings clear the way for an unprecedented attack on freedom of the press and free speech.

To understand the import of Hutton's findings, it is necessary to review the circumstances under which the inquiry was convened.

Months before hostilities against Iraq began, Blair decided to line his government up behind the drive of the Bush administration for war. He launched a propaganda offensive aimed at terrorizing the population and stampeding it behind the war drive, making blood-curdling claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and an imminent threat to the safety of the British people that have since been proven to be utterly false.

Blair pursued his war policy in the face of the indisputable opposition of the majority of people in Britain, not to mention the popular will of broad masses of people in the rest of Europe, the US, and around the world. Some two million people marched in London on February 15, 2003 to oppose the coming war, in the largest political demonstration in British history. This and similar expressions of popular opposition and anger showed that a large majority of the population had made its own evaluation of Blair's WMD assertions, and concluded they were not credible.

Blair's response was to declare that the essence of democracy was the conduct of state policy in defiance of the popular will.

His drive to war provoked significant differences within the state apparatus. This included factions within the intelligence services that objected to the manipulation and misuse of intelligence for the purpose of justifying a predetermined policy of military intervention. The eventual response of the Blair government was to silence all such opposition by "outing" one of its chief critics from within the intelligence establishment—Dr. Kelly—and making an example of him.

The dossiers of September 2002 and February 2003 making the case for war aroused serious criticism as soon as they were published. September's dossier contained the by now infamous claim that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes, and the charge that Iraq had sought to purchase nuclear materials from Africa. The claim that Niger had supplied yellow cake uranium to Saddam Hussein was exposed as a fraud by the International Atomic Energy Agency only

weeks after it was made a centrepiece of US and British propaganda. Within a matter of hours, the February 2003 dossier was found to have been largely plagiarised from a US student thesis that was based on intelligence more than ten years old.

Blair hoped that victory in Iraq would allow him to suppress such uncomfortable facts and to cow his political critics. Instead, the declaration of an end to hostilities was followed by mounting popular resistance within Iraq to the joint US/British occupation, prompting fears that it would prove to be a new Vietnam.

Under these circumstances, sections of the security apparatus sought to exonerate themselves and pin the blame for the Iraqi debacle firmly on Blair. Hence the decision of Kelly, Britain's top weapons inspector and a man intimately involved in the preparation of the September, 2002 dossier, to give an unscheduled interview to the BBC's *Today* reporter, Andrew Gilligan.

When Gilligan reported at the end of March, 2003 that his anonymous source (Kelly) had spoken of significant discontent within the security apparatus as to the bona fides of the September dossier and had blamed Blair's Director of Communications Alastair Campbell for having made it more "sexy," the government decided to mount a campaign to silence the BBC and demand a retraction.

The government made it known that Kelly was the source of the Gilligan report and forced him to testify before two parliamentary inquiries. On July 18, Kelly was found dead in the woods near his home.

This event led to demands for an investigation not only of the circumstances leading to Kelly's death, but also of the way in which the war had been prepared and whether false intelligence claims had been employed by the government.

Blair could not countenance any such investigation, and determined that any official inquiry would focus exclusively on Kelly's death and his government's dispute with the BBC. To this end Blair appointed Lord Hutton to preside over an inquiry that was designed to conceal rather than reveal the truth.

Hutton, a former Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, had made his reputation defending British soldiers in Northern Ireland during the inquiry into Bloody Sunday 1972, and prosecuting alleged terrorists in the no-jury Diplock courts. Considered a "safe pair of hands", he was given a narrow remit that did not extend beyond examining the immediate circumstances leading up to Kelly's death. Though he went on to take oral and written evidence from leading figures within the civil service and the government, right up to Blair himself, that dealt extensively with the preparation of the September 2002 intelligence dossier, Hutton's verdict is entirely consistent with this initial proscription.

Many commentators who followed the inquiry's proceedings expressed incredulity over Hutton's final ruling. From the standpoint of the facts placed before him—the mass of evidence showing that the government must have known its intelligence was dubious, at best, and that it had sought to "sex up" the dossier, as Kelly had claimed—Hutton's findings

make no sense. But politically, Hutton has performed the job with which he was charged.

In order to arrive at his absurd conclusion—clearing Blair and the rest of his government of any wrongdoing and instead attacking both the BBC and Kelley—Hutton declared that the objective fact that no WMDs were found in Iraq and the government's claims were proven to be false was irrelevant! All that mattered was whether Blair knowingly used false intelligence claims, and since there was no proof as to the prime minister's mental processes at the time, he had to be given the benefit of the doubt and politically vindicated.

Hutton's pose of agnosticism toward Blair's intelligence claims did not prevent him from declaring—without any substantiation—that the government and the security services had acted in good faith in proclaiming that Iraq represented a real and immediate danger. Nor did it prevent him from denouncing as impermissible any questioning of their "integrity".

Even with regard to Kelly's death, the government was found to be blameless, and its representatives of having acted impeccably. Hutton ignored all testimony showing that the government outed the scientist as part of a campaign to silence its critics, including the diary entry of Campbell explaining that naming Kelly would "f—k Gilligan".

Sole blame was placed on the shoulders of Gilligan and the BBC.

Gilligan was found to have committed the cardinal sin of impugning the integrity of the government and the security services, especially by his remark that the government "probably" knew its claim that Iraq could launch WMD within 45-minutes was wrong. The BBC's board of governors was found to have "defective" editorial structures because it had allowed his story to stand and was condemned for having defended their reporter from Campbell's witch-hunt.

Hutton also concluded that Kelly was "partially responsible" for his own misfortune, underscoring the ruthlessness of the British state, even against one of its own.

Thus, reality has been turned on its head.

Gilligan and the BBC are held to an exacting account for a never repeated remark made during a one minute, early morning radio broadcast. In contrast, the government and its spy chiefs are not required to answer for using untrue statements to drag the country into a war that has killed thousands of innocent people, as well as nearly sixty British soldiers, and reduced a country to ruins.

The verdict against the BBC has major implications for the future of the corporation and more broadly for press freedoms in Britain. The entire future of the BBC as a public broadcaster may be thrown into question when its charter is due for renewal in 2006. The commercial stations may be allowed a greater share of the market, with one of the major beneficiaries being the government's most fervent supporter—Rupert Murdoch.

Hutton's report marks a black day for democratic rights in Britain. In overriding the right to publish a story so clearly based upon the public interest, Hutton has confirmed the contempt felt by the political elite towards the popular will. His findings prove that all avenues through which working people were once able to exert some form of control over the government and the state have been closed down.

His conclusions must be set in the context of the offensive against civil liberties that has accompanied the government's so-called "war on terror"—from the detaining of people indefinitely without charge to plans to implement legislation enabling parliament to be bypassed in the event of a state of emergency being declared.

Not even during the Second World War, when Britain did face a real threat of invasion, have so many basic democratic freedoms been jettisoned.

This cannot be attributed to the personal failings of Blair or his cabinet. The government has faced virtually no opposition to its warmongering

and attacks on democratic rights, whether from the judiciary, the opposition parties, the media or any other section of the establishment. And it has been able to build on a legacy left to it by previous Conservative governments.

The establishment of a legal framework for a de facto dictatorship must express profound social and economic processes. It manifests an international phenomenon that finds its most finished expression in the United States.

Political and economic power has become concentrated in the hands of a super-rich financial oligarchy, which rules over a society riven by historically unprecedented levels of social inequality. In Britain, the richest 1,000 individuals have a combined personal wealth of more than £155 billion, largely accumulated as a result of government policies aimed at slashing corporate taxation and cutting public spending. The aim of these policies is to transform the country into a cheap labour platform for global investors.

So pronounced are class antagonisms, so great is the contradiction between the interests of the rulers and the ruled, that the democratic process has become atrophied and sclerotic. The broad mass of the population must be excluded from the political process in order that there can be no check on the activities of an elite whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of the working class.

This common pro-big business agenda ensures that none of the old parties enjoy mass support. This is especially true of the Labour Party, whose traditional working class constituency is the target for its right-wing policies. Whatever their tactical differences, all sections of the ruling class are in full agreement with the programme of imperialist aggression and the destruction of workers' living standards that is being spearheaded by Blair's government.

Only this can explain why Hutton and Blair believe they can get away with such a crude whitewash.

The necessary conclusions must be drawn. Working people cannot look to any section of the establishment or to dissenting elements within the state to oppose war and defend their essential social interests and democratic rights. Popular hostility to the government must find independent political expression through the construction of a new workers' party based on a socialist programme. As part of this fight, the demand must be raised for the immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces from Iraq, and for Blair and Bush to be held to account for their war crimes.



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